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AUTHOR Hayes, Mary Jane; Price, Valencia
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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the outcomes of the social forces that operate against African American males in school and society and their all too frequent placement in special education programs, with the core of the problem remaining in the Institutions of Higher Education (IHE). Reasons for the overrepresentation of African American children and youth in special education program are discussed, including placement and testing procedures, cultural differences, parent and teacher training programs, economic factors, and the inability of schools to educate diverse populations adequately. The methods of IHEs in preparing pre-service teachers are critiqued, particularly the separation of special and regular pre-service programs, and the lack of coursework at the college level that concentrates on classroom management techniques, modifications of curricula materials to address the needs of diverse learners, or collaborative strategies to promote dialogue among parents, students, and other educators. The paper closes by emphasizing the need for IHEs to combine regular and special education teacher programs and reform their curriculum to graduate teachers fully prepared to teach culturally and ethnically diverse students in the 21st century. (Contains 15 references.) (CR)

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Curriculum Reform to Address Multicultural Issues in Special Education

Mary Jane Hayes, M.Ed. and Valencia Price, M.A.

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Abstract

The overrepresentation of African American children and youth in special education programs has remained a persistent reality even after 25 years of recognition. There are a number of reasons for this difference in placement practices, which includes placement and testing procedures, cultural differences, parent and teacher training programs, economic factors, and the inability of schools to educate diverse populations adequately. The fact exists that disproportionately large numbers of African Americans are being persistently misdiagnosed as disabled and placed in special education programs. However, the root of the problem may be in how Institutions of Higher Education (IHE) are preparing pre-service teachers. Within traditional teacher programs, special and regular pre-service teachers are educated in "separate, but equal" programs. New teachers in the regular classroom are too often ill prepared to meet the challenges in today's diverse school environments. Coursework at the college level has not concentrated on classroom management techniques, modifications of curricula materials to address the needs of diverse learners, or collaborative strategies to promote dialogue among parents, students and other educators. In order for IHEs to graduate teachers fully prepared to teach culturally and ethnically diverse students effectively in the 21st century, curriculum reform must be a priority.

Statement of the Problem

Why are African American males disproportionately placed in special education programs? Many reasons have been offered for this disparity in placement, including placement and testing procedures, cultural differences, parent and teaching training problems, economic factors, and the failure of schools to educate them adequately.

Introduction

This paper focuses on the outcomes of the social forces that operate against African American males in school and society and their all too frequent placement in special education programs, with the core of the problem remaining in the Institutions of Higher Education (IHE). For the most part, teacher training programs across the U.S. train educators in much the same way as they did twenty-five years ago, prior to the mandates of Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

Special Education

Special education was mandated by law in 1975 with the passage of the Education for all Handicapped Children Act (EHA), now called the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The purpose of the IDEA was to provide specialized services to students who, by virtue of disability, could not profit from regular educational curriculum and instruction. The law was intended to regulate and extend to all children, regardless of disability, the provision of special education services that already existed in various forms across the country. By the time it was enacted, evidence of misuse was already visible, as reflected in the IDEA's requirement that

assessments for special education purposes be nonbiased and conducted by a multi-disciplinary team.

Racial, gender, cultural and linguistic biases remain integral aspects of the special education process, particularly for African American males. The entire process is seriously biased against African-American male students, from their first experiences in regular education through their disproportionate referral to, assessment for, and placement in special education programs.

By 1965 in San Francisco, California, resistance to the court-ordered desegregation initiated by the Supreme Court's ruling in Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas (1954) led to the charge that districts were using special education classes as a cover for segregation. In 1974, Johnson v. San Francisco Unified School District brought this charge to the courts. In that same year, the plaintiffs in the now-famous case of Larry P. et al. v. Wilson Riles et al. (1979) first filed suit, accusing a San Francisco school district of discriminating against five African-American children who had been placed in educable mental retarded (EMR) classes.

In the district from which the Larry P. case emerged, approximately 29% of the student population was African American, while 66% of students in the EMR classrooms were African American. Similarly, in the state as a whole, approximately 10% of students were African American, while 25% of students in the state's EMR classrooms were African American. After a series of injunctions and appeals, the judge in this case concluded that the district□s EMR classes were dead-end situations. He further claimed that the IQ tests used to assess eligibility

for these programs were culturally biased, that they had not been validated for the purpose of special education placement of African American children, and that the statewide testing process for EMR placement revealed an unlawful segregative intent (Dent, Mendocal, Pierce, and West, 1991). The judge issued a ban on the use of IQ tests for African American students for the purpose of special education placement and ordered the state to monitor and eliminate disproportionate placement of African American students in classes for students classified as EMR.

Since those early years, the phenomenon of overrepresentation of African Americans in special education, and their corresponding under representation in programs for the gifted and talented, has continued unabated. In 1982, a National Academy of Sciences panel was given the task of studying this phenomenon. Finn (1982), one of the members of this panel, identified certain trends that are still in existence: (1) the larger the size of the EMR program existing in a district, the greater the disproportionate placement of minority groups in the program, (2) African American students were over represented in the EMR category nationwide, while overrepresentation of other minorities was more likely to occur only in states where their numbers were high, and (3) greater disproportionate placements generally occurred in school districts predominated by students from the lower socioeconomic levels.

For many African American males, the special education process begins on the first day of their school careers. From the beginning, the typical classroom presents for them an unfamiliar mode of learning and behavior. The challenge for their teacher should be to identify the Africa American male students' knowledge and skills needed for school success.

One of the goals of Goals 2000 Act (1994) is that upon entering school, "all children will be ready to learn the same things in the same way, at the same time, or in the same sequence". It is, of course, the teachers who ascertain the child's current level of knowledge on a variety of dimensions and who begin instruction at that level. Because of this, the preparation that teachers receive in working with diverse learners is crucial.

The majority of public elementary school teachers in the U.S. are women, and predominately white women. On the other hand, the majority of students in these schools are predominately non-white. Most teacher preparation programs typically do not address the implication of this differential experience based on race and gender. Several traditional features of African American males' behavioral profile exacerbate the average, white female teachers' negative view of them. One feature would be the high physical activity level of African American boys, as compared to girls, which has been documented by numerous scholars (Hale-Benson, 1982; Kunjufu, 1985). Added to this is the historical tension arising from American whites' fear of African-American male physique, and the likelihood of this fear being extended to Black boys and young men. Another featured characteristic would be the patterns of language learning and usage of African American males that are generally not valued in schools.

Cultural preferences for both physical and verbal behavior have a powerful influence on teachers which are, the source of the initial referral of children for special education evaluation. In addition, teachers are driven by the structure of schools, which calls for control, homogeneity, and the urging of socially sanctioned behaviors and language. Teachers do not generally build on children's behaviors; they typically aim to extinguish and replace these behaviors with conduct

more acceptable to them and to move quickly to find the deficit in those children who prove less malleable to conformity.

There is research on specific instructional strategies used with poor readers, which presents a dreary picture of the disadvantage at which African American males are placed by the preconceived expectations of teachers. For example, using the concept of "academic engaged time", researchers have examined the actual amount of time spent by different groups of students on academic tasks in the classroom. According to Kamps et al. (1989), poor urban children spend significantly less time directly engaged in academic learning than do their suburban counterparts. More than two decades of research on differential teacher behavior toward poor and middle-class students shows that the latter group is typically exposed to more comprehensive-based instruction, while the former receives more skill-based, often decontextualized reading instruction (Allington, 1980).

Other than the teachers, the quality of the schools African-American male students attended comes into question. Kozol's 1991 study of the savage inequalities in our nation's public schools reveals that poor children, which means a disproportionate number of African American children, attend poor schools. As he notes:

> There is a certain grim aesthetic in the almost perfect upward scaling of expenditures from poorest of the poor to richest of the rich within the New York City area: $5,590 for the children of the Bronx and Harlem, $6,340 for the non-white kids of Roosevelt $6,400 for the Black kids of Mount Vernon, $4,400 for the slightly better-off community of Yonkers, over $11,000 for the very lucky children of Manhasset, Jericho and Great Neck. In an ethnical society, where money was apportioned in accord with need, these scalings would run almost in precise reverse.

Despite the inequalities of schools and the differences in children's readiness for standard school curricula and behavior, all children are expected to reach, within one year, the level of mastery of academic content determined by their teachers. To fail to do this is to fail the year and be retained in that grade. Many African American boys are taught early that they are failures. As the cycle of low expectations, low self-confidence, and inappropriate curricula and teaching methods builds, their learning difficulties begin to appear endemic, and educational professionals begin to ask if there is something wrong with these students. Once a child has been referred for learning disability evaluation, the probability of special education placement is very high. This process in schools traps many African American males in a cycle of academic failure that leads to the designation of disability.

Other things that must be reviewed are, who does the referring, and on what basis? As noted, teacher perception is at the center of the referral process. Hence, the subjective nature of the mild disability classifications is compounded both by the bias in the informal judgements that teachers make and the subsequent formal assessment students undergo as a result. An example of this would be a Serious Emotional Disturbance (SED) placement, which does not rely on standardized assessment instruments, the teacher's decision to refer a child is the most crucial step in the process. This process may begin with any behavior that causes discomfort for a classroom teacher.

What are not often taken into account is the teachers'' own contributions to students' behavioral and learning patterns. Most of the white females who make up a large percentage of the U.S. teachers are for the most part uninformed of and insensitive to their African American

students' life experiences. Therefore, not taken into consideration are the knowledge and skills these students have gained from their experiences that may be totally at odds with the knowledge and skills desired by the school. Often, the lack of understanding can lead teachers to enact disciplinary responses that may not be necessary if they understood the meaning of the students' behavior.

Once students are referred, then what? How are students assessed to ascertain whether or not they are eligible for special education services? Litigation regarding the disproportionate placement of minority students in special education focuses on bias in the IQ tests used for placement, but the courts have not been unanimous in their position regarding this question. There are some researchers who continue to use the statistical method of item analysis to argue that the tests are not biased, while others contend that technical approaches to test validity ignore the essentially biased underpinnings of standardized testing.

This view maintains that the statistical approach to establishing test validity ignores that a test reflects the cultural knowledge base and cognitive orientation of its creator(s). Therefore, tests that are standardized on the Euro-American majority, and that include test items chosen from the cultural experiences of this majority, are biased in favor of that majority and therefore biased against minorities, whose cultural experiences are distinctly different.

The point is that IQ tests do not test ability, instead, they test an individual's learning in a number of areas. There are similar concerns regarding the linguistic aspects of testing, arguing that expectations about students language skills are determined by the standard language of the majority. Education professionals need specific training in the administration and interpretation

of speech and language tests (Adger et al., 1992). Hence, the entire testing process is biased by virtue of placing at a disadvantage those students whose cultural and social experiences do not include the kinds of information and skills tested by these instruments. As Hilliard (1977) states, "Item content is simply a matter of the arbitrary choices of an in-group of item writers. Certainly the African-American is poorly represented, if at all. To many African-Americans the norm is abnormal" (p.197).

Although special education programs have had a poor track record, they continue to be used frequently as alternatives to regular education for African American males. In addition to these patterns, African American males are increasingly likely to be educated in separate classrooms or facilities. The programs in these separate schools are now likely to prepare students for other separate and even more punitive facilities when they leave school than for the real world of work and responsibility. The more separate the educational placement, the more unrealistic and inappropriate the instruction is likely to be and the less preparatory for real life. If only a small fraction (6%) of teenaged African American males in special education programs are likely to return to regular education, then the outcomes for post-school employment, higher education, preparation for jobs that offer opportunities in high-demand technology fields, and ultimately the ability to become a source of support for their families and assume the role of responsible fatherhood are dramatically diminished.

Curriculum Reform

In light of the growing numbers of African American students in special education a number of issues concerning teacher preparation programs emerge. Most students in special

education are served in separate settings. This is also true of the "separate, but equal" programs of regular and special education. This dual system is perceived to perpetuate the separateness of normal and special needs students within the school systems (Welch, 1996; Reed & Monda-Amaya, 1995). Although education reform has addressed issues relating to culturally and ethnically diverse populations, the number of referrals to special education, particularly of African American males, has steadily increased. Clearly, this evidence alone must lead us to examine the effectiveness of teacher training as it presently exists with a distinction between regular and special education.

There has been in the past years greater emphasis placed on teacher preparation programs to prepare teachers to work with students from diverse backgrounds. But the reality is that most teachers do not perceive themselves as capable of teaching these diverse populations who may also be experiencing academic difficulties. As Welch (1996) points out,

> The alarming figures reported suggest that teachers do not have adequate skills nor the technical support from specialists to meet the needs of students, regardless of socioeconomic status or ethnic group, who experience academic or behavior problems...students from diverse populations continue to experience academic difficulty in classroom settings. As a result, teachers often refer these children to special education on the assumption that they have a disabling condition (p. 357).

On the other hand, special educators are equally ill-prepared to provide "culturally sensitive instruction to African American learners with disabilities and to continue to plan instruction and activities based on students' disabilities, with little consideration given to the diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds of the students" (Franklin, 1992, p. 115). Special educators must learn to adapt instructional approaches that are meaningful and reflective of the diversity of these students.

The real problem lies in the way IHEs are preparing teachers, delivering instruction in the same manner as it was given 20 years ago, and certainly not in keeping with the changing climates of today's public schools. In their review of the literature regarding reform in the relationship between regular and special education training, Strawderman and Lindsey (1995) found three major trends: "infusing of cross-disciplinary collaboration or teaming activities into existing programs, restructuring of organizational systems, and restructuring of coursework and/or course requirements for certification" (p. 96).

Collaboration and consultation practices between special and regular educators have not been modeled at the higher education level within programs. The same barriers exist to higher education faculty working together as do those experienced by classroom teachers working in inclusive environments: "lack of planning time for collaborative efforts, lack of knowledge about each other's discipline, and the content demands of specific courses" (Strawderman & Lindsey, 1995, p. 96). Other barriers to incorporating more inclusive elements in instructional practices in higher education are the attitudes and beliefs of higher education faculty about the necessity of educating all students in the regular education classroom, regardless of diversity or disability. Although inclusive education is one of many educational reforms impacting on public schools, those responsible for training teachers to work in those settings are not always convinced of the feasibility of including all students in regular education. This is particularly disheartening in light of certain reform movements, such as the Regular Education Initiative (REI), inclusive education in the form of least restrictive environment as mandated by IDEA, and Goals 2000: Educate America Act. These reform acts presuppose that special and regular educators possess the time,

skills, and knowledge to collaborate professionally with one another. However, most training programs do not require regular students and sometimes special education students to take a course in collaborative techniques. Even if such a course were offered, there still remains the problem of faculty attitudes and beliefs toward inclusion and the evident lack of collaborative/teaming modeling at the higher education level. However, if inclusive and collaborative teaming across these two disciplines is to occur, faculty of IHE must begin to consult and educate one another.

> Teacher education programs must model inclusive practices with students in university classrooms. Our students bring to us the full range of diversity (e.g., disability, socioeconomic status, race, culture, gender, and sexual orientation). If we have mechanisms in place to recognize, value, and support such student diversity, providing needed assistance to both faculty and students in the process will provide powerful models. If we do not, our teachers in training will clearly see the gap between even our best words and our actions (Peterson & Beloin, 1998, p. 316)

Hinders (1995) suggests that this may best be implemented by infusing special and regular education coursework. She notes that initially this infusion would need to be carried out collaboratively through team-teaching or a consultative model. But eventually the course content could be taught independently by faculty members.

Another aspect of cross-disciplinary training is in the field experience our students receive. It is crucial that regular teachers have field experience in special education settings as well as in inclusive settings. This would provide hands-on knowledge about diversity addressed in the classroom. It would also provide a means for strengthening classroom assessment and observational techniques, skills deemed necessary in working with diverse populations. "Well-designed clinical experiences provide preservice general educators with insights into student

behavior that enable them to make appropriate instructional decisions and to demonstrate flexibility toward integration" (Reed & Monda-Amaya, 1995, p. 270).

The majority of teacher preparation programs require regular educators to take at least one course in special education. On the whole, this class usually concentrates on characteristics and categories of disabilities rather than on how to make instructional modifications to one's curriculum in order to best serve the needs of all students (Reed & Monda-Amaya, 1995). Reed & Monda-Amaya (1995) examined certain studies (Goodlad & Field, 1993; Kearney & Durand, 1992) and found that preservice regular teachers believed themselves ill-prepared to adapt instruction for students with special needs. Again, the increase of referrals of African American students to special education by regular educators can be directly attributed to the perceived lack of effective education at the university level. However, by addressing special education content in regular education courses, specifically modifications of teaching methods and styles, regular educators may be better prepared to meet the needs of diverse learners.

Conclusion

Only teachers who are broadly prepared to meet the challenges in today's public schools will be effective facilitators of learning for the diversity of students in regular classrooms. There is a great need for IHEs to restructure and refocus the content and delivery of regular and special education programs. Hinders (1995) advocates that the infusion of regular and special education should be accomplished to the end that the two programs would no longer be separate, but one. Although her idea is extreme, it does have merit in bridging the gap between two distinct disciplines.

In the meantime, less drastic reform can occur in higher education. All teachers should have training in identifying and developing appropriate educational programs for a wide range of students. Faculty of teacher training programs need to mesh course content from various disciplines to address the issues of diversity while allowing students the necessary field experiences needed to fully integrate principles taught in the classroom. And finally, collaborative techniques should be taught and modeled at the higher education level.

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